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Going back to go forwards? From multi-stakeholder cooperatives to Open Cooperatives in food and farming

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Abstract

Many authors have proposed cooperatives as one of the preferred governance structures for realising alternative food systems, being recommended both in farming and also downstream at consumer level. However, recommendations for the cooperative model still draw a dividing line between producer and consumer cooperatives. As opposed to conventional agricultural cooperatives (ACs) made up of farmer members only, the multi-stakeholder model brings together producers, consumers and/or restaurateurs under one single enterprise. This paper analyses multi-stakeholder cooperatives' (MSCs) potential to recreate more sustainable food flows between rural and urban areas and to overcome the limitations of conventional farmer cooperatives focused more on economic than social and environmental benefits. As part of this research, historical data from cooperative archives is used to look at the history and early attempts of multi-stakeholder cooperation in food and farming. Additionally, current supporting evidence from Spain and UK, in the context of European food policy frameworks, is also presented. A four-fold proposal for open cooperatives is discussed and applied to the analysis of the case studies in the framework of global transformative networks and alliances. The introduction of different types of members seems to both complicate and enrich the cooperative mission, both theoretically and in practice. Their networks with other social movements reveal how the MSCs presented are trying to change, rather than adapt to the market economies they struggle to survive in. The findings suggest MSCs in food and farming are striving to achieve more-than-economic benefits and are moving into the arena of the open and pro-commons economy and other global social movements.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder cooperatives, sustainable food systems, food policy, solidarity economy, open cooperatives, pro-commons.

1. Introduction

Multi-stakeholder cooperatives (MSCs) are a relatively new form of cooperative that has been emerging over the last two decades in Europe and North America (Lund, 2012). These cooperatives allow and bring together different types of membership, often consumers and providers of services and goods, but sometimes also workers and buyers (Kindling Trust, 2012). In Europe and Canada, MSCs are growing strong in social services and the healthcare sector (Münkner, 2004). In the US, the movement for relocalisation of food production and consumption has found a useful organisational and legal tool in the MSC model (Lund, 2012). However, little empirical research has been done to explore and discuss how the MSC movement is developing new models of food production and provision. Furthermore, very scarce academic literature has dealt with MSCs in the specific context of food and farming initiatives and existing publications focus on the US context only (Lund, 2012; Gray, 2014). This paper makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to this literature. Empirical, by analysing two European case studies, one from Southern Europe (Spain) and one from Northern Europe (UK). In a time when many conventional farmers' cooperatives are focusing on the economic benefits of the cooperative model, forgetting their transformative origins (Gray and Stevenson, 2008; Berthelot, 2012; Gray, 2014), this research asks whether the MSC model can re-inject cooperative principles and the movement back into food and farming cooperatives.

The paper starts with a review of historical records, academic literature and current

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thinking from the MSC movement on multi-stakeholderism in food and farming. After discussing how the MSC model is not a new idea but that it is re-emerging in the context of globalised food and globalised social movements, data from two MSCs based in Europe are presented in the framework of the Open Cooperative (OC) model. This framework is used to explore the type of MSCs that are emerging in food and farming in Europe, specifically in Spain and the UK. The theoretical contribution of this paper relates to analysing the extent to which contemporary MSCs in the UK and Spain conform to the OC model, and in doing so, reflecting on how this fosters their success in maintaining sustainable practices and the more-than-economic benefits associated with such a model. Can these MSCs be considered open cooperatives? How do they reconcile the different interests of different groups within an organisation? Are they successful in serving the interests of the two weakest links in the food chain, i.e. producers and consumers? Putting them in the context of the globally connected pro-commons movement, the OC framework helps investigate whether the MSCs studied have the potential to connect with other pro-commons initiatives across the world in an attempt to change, rather than adapt to, the food economies they struggle to survive in (Gray et al., 2001). The paper ends with a discussion on the dynamics and challenges facing these new cooperative arrangements as well as the more-than-economic benefits they are reproducing through their practices by pushing the cooperative movement beyond survival mode in current market economies.

2. Multi-stakeholderism, an old idea coming of age?

It is important to acknowledge that multi-stakeholderism is not a new idea and that early cooperators soon realised that bringing members together to cooperativise as many areas of their lives as possible made sense at least in theory (Reymond, 1964). Historical data on the early attempts to create MSCs reveal the common underlying acknowledgement shared by present day MSCs of how cooperatives do not operate outside the market, but within it, and as such, are strongly compelled to imitate capitalist relations as a way to survive in the dominant economic context within which they exist.

The cooperative social movement began in the early 18th century with the realisation that the power of organised cooperation could have the potential to transform society and reverse structural conditions that produce high inequalities (Shaffer, 1999). Food has always been a core element in cooperativism since the very beginnings of the movement in the 18th Century (Burnett, 1985; Birchall, 1994; Garrido Herrero, 2003; Rhodes, 2012).

The earliest records of cooperative enterprises date back to the 1750s (Shaffer, 1999). In terms of food producers' cooperation, the Jumbo Cooperative Society near Rochdale founded in 1851 was the first recorded worker cooperative farm, dissolving after 10 years (Birchall, 1994). Jumbo and the famous Rochdale Cooperative Store were experiments that highlighted the active role of urban citizens in developing a new identity as workers, consumers and producers. In this sense, Jumbo Farm can arguably be considered the first formal organisation of 'cooperative prosumers', as engaged consumers also took an active role in food production.

Historical records show that cooperators soon realised the potential benefits and limitations associated with the possibility of merging different types of members into multi-stakeholder (MS) ventures and the topic was in fact discussed at several cooperative congresses (Reymond, 1964). The integration of different types of members into one single association is the defining difference between multi-stakeholder cooperatives (MSCs) and the more conventional and common single-membership cooperatives (Münkner, 2004). The internationally accepted definition of the latter describes

cooperatives as: *'an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise'* (ICA, 1995). Conventional cooperatives are run by and for the benefit of their members. The introduction of different types of members in MSCs both complicates and enriches the cooperative mission as Lund has pointed out:

> *"MSCs are coops that formally allow for governance by representatives of two or more "stakeholder" groups within the same organization, including consumers, producers, workers, volunteers or general community supporters [...] The common mission that is the central organizing principle of a multi- stakeholder cooperative is also often more broad than the kind of mission statement needed to capture the interests of only a single stakeholder group, and will generally reflect the interdependence of interests of the multiple partners."* (Lund, 2011:1)

The UK's Cooperative Wholesale Society (CWS), founded in 1863 to supply the more than a thousand consumer cooperatives already operating at the time in the UK, was one of the first attempts to bring together worker and consumer members and the challenges were soon evident, as this excerpt from an Economic and Social Consultative Assembly report reflects:

> *"For some time there were difficulties with the British CWS which had its own creameries in Ireland: was the purpose of the creameries to market the produce of the Irish peasant on the best possible terms, or was it to supply butter to British consumers at the lowest possible price? The conflict of interests led Plunkett and his colleagues to resign from the Cooperative Union and found the Irish Agricultural Organization Society in 1894".* (ESCA, 1986:525)

The issue of "fair prices" is still largely unresolved today as will be discussed when introducing the case studies. Nearly a hundred years later, in 1959, another MS attempt took place in France through an agreement between its central agricultural and consumers' cooperative organisations. A commission was set up to report on the difficulties encountered, summarised as follows (Reymond, 1964):

1. The system proved unwieldy for handling operations through the central organisations and it was recommended that the largest number of transactions were better carried out locally.
2. A process for ensuring compliance with quality standards and agreed prices had to be improved.
3. Price-fixing was a long-standing problem, and despite being in a closed, cooperative "full circle", ignoring the normal market to negotiate prices proved impossible.
4. Price variations complicate the purchasing side of the relationship
5. There is a problem associated with the fear of damaging existing relations with suppliers-dealers.

The above points highlight how cooperatives do not exist in a policy or economic vacuum, but as today struggle to survive in capitalist societies ruled by the laws of the market. Nevertheless, the French commission also noted how the will to succeed from both sides was a significant strength of the model. The ideal endured, at least at the theoretical level, and more modern cooperative thinkers continued to write about the economic benefits they identified would occur when linking production and consumption:

> *"if a considerable proportion of farm crops could be sold directly by farmer-owned enterprises to consumer-owned ones, the 'spread' between what farmers receive and what consumers pay would amount simply to the costs of processing, transportation and sale."* (Voorhis, 1961:83)

3. Multi-stakeholder cooperative thinking today

Despite the apparent conflicting interests discussed in the previous section, frequent cases of cooperatives extending their activities, and thus the range of the objectives in the membership, currently exist in sectors other than food. An example of this is the case of mutuals such as saving cooperatives that include members of the same class with completely opposite interests: savers and borrowers (ResPublica, 2012); but it has been argued that interest harmonisation between savers and borrowers is facilitated by the fact that in the course of time, most members turn from depositors to borrowers and vice versa (Münkner, 2012). This change in identities is not as common in food, although farmers are also consumers and in MSCs, members are given opportunities to try different roles as consumers or volunteer workers (Kindling Trust, 2012). Leviten-Reid and Fairbairn have also challenged the negative predictions that transaction cost theories make of MSCs and have proposed a new framework based on a governance of the commons theory to show how the multi-stakeholder model can be efficient and effective (Leviten-Reid and Fairbairn, 2011). Theories of the commons normally refer to the challenges of managing common pool natural resources, such as rivers, fisheries, forests and shared irrigation systems (Ostrom, 1990). But this model has also been applied to worker cooperatives in capitalist societies, proposed by some authors as "labour commons" that generate *commonwealth* through their practices (Vieta, 2010).

In this context of the commons, evidence from Italy, the first country with MSCs providing social services since 1991, shows that a MSC is not a zero-sum game — one cohort of members does not need to win to the detriment of others, as often happens with natural resources (Borzaga and Depedri, 2010:122). In a similar line, Mooney has highlighted how this "rationalization of an antagonistic economic relationship in its formulation of ''producer groups'' and ''consumer groups'' who simply carry on the battle in another sphere" is divisive and against the original cooperative vision to create an organisational structure that could merge and unify those interests and needs for a common good (Mooney, 2004:86).

Münkner has called for the introduction of MSCs as more efficient and locally-embedded providers of public services but also because they represent "new and attractive forms of cooperation in times where the numbers of registered cooperatives are steadily shrinking as a result of mergers" (Münkner, 2004:50). For Münkner, the fact that MSCs are emerging all over the world is a sign of how conventional rules of cooperation are outdated and are being reinvented to "maintain organised self-help as a relevant answer to current problems in times of rapid change" (Mooney, 2004:65).

Michael Bauwens, the founder of the Peer to Peer Foundation (P2P), a forward thinking international organisation focused on "studying, researching, documenting and promoting peer to peer practices in a very broad sense" (P2P, 2016), has also stated the limitations of current cooperative models:

> *"The problem with the capitalist market and enterprise is that it excludes negative externalities, [both] social and environmental, from its field of vision. Worker- or consumer-owned cooperatives that operate in the competitive marketplace solve work democracy issues but not the issues of externalities. Following the competitive logic and the interests of their own members only, they eventually start behaving in very similar ways" (Bauwens, 2014)*

Bauwens' concerns over social and environmental externalities ignored by private companies are shared by other cooperative thinkers. In 2014, Thomas Gray called for the formation of MSCs based on three historical cooperative tensions: (1) participation

and democracy versus efficiency and capitalism, (2) localism versus globalism, and (3) production versus consumption (Gray, 2013). Gray suggests that MSCs can help ease these tensions while also offering an integrative organisational structure that can automatically internalise the current externalisation of human and environmental costs involved in food production and consumption (Gray, 2014). These tensions are similar to the ones earlier identified by Mooney (2004).

Lund has also discussed modern MSCs in food and farming within the context of the emerging concept of value chains (Lund, 2012). As opposed to supply chain, the development of the concept of value chain provides a framework for indicators beyond economic transactions; this is a key consideration in food production and consumption since these activities involve many cultural and social aspects, such as taste, identity, connection with nature and community, that are ignored in financial exchanges (Baggini, 2014). As opposed to other actors who predict a fate of MSC conversion to private firms due to complex governance structures and cumbersome decision-making processes (Lindsay and Hems, 2004), Lund offers a rationale for seeing membership heterogeneity as a strength rather than a barrier for efficiency (Lund, 2012). By fostering long-term relationships rather than punctual commercial transactions, Lund affirms MSCs can be transformational and overcome the higher transactional costs that traditional economic theory would expect from the involvement of several parties (Lund, 2012).

As Lund, Bauwens draws on the idea of "value chain" but goes beyond Lund and Gray by calling not only for MSCs but for a new model that has been labelled "open coops". This model combines multi-stakeholdership and the co-production of the value chain by everyone affected by a provisioning service. Bauwens believes MS is the cooperativism of the future and can help overcome co-optation trends in conventional cooperatives. This open cooperative framework is introduced in the next section, then used to analyse the case studies presented to investigate if the MSCs studied have the potential to connect with other pro-commons initiatives across the world in an attempt to change, rather than adapt to, the food economies they struggle to survive in (Gray et al., 2001).

4. Methodology and the Open Cooperative Framework

The study of multi-stakeholder food cooperatives presents an opportunity to bridge the common analytical gap that silos food production and consumption activities into two separate categories. With reference to this traditional theoretical gap, Goodman and DuPuis (2002) have called for an integrated analytical framework after reviewing the agrifood and food studies literature and realised the shortcomings of both production-centred perspectives and more "cultural" and consumption-centred theories that try to reclaim the consumer back into rural sociology. For the authors, '*how the consumer goes about "knowing" food is just as important as farmers' knowledge networks in the creation of an alternative food system'* (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002, 15).

Very scarce academic literature has dealt with MSCs in the specific context of food and farming initiatives (Lund, 2012; Gray, 2014). Gray's aforementioned framework can offer a helpful tool to assess MSCs' potential to overcome historical weakness in agricultural cooperatives (Gray, 2014). This paper attempts to move the analysis of MSCs one step further to consider a new framework, namely the Open Cooperative (OC) framework, that emerges from a pro-commons globally connected social movement as a lens to analyse the social movement phenomenon of which the MSCs discussed in this paper are themselves a part (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014; Bauwens, 2014). The OC framework is highly relevant to highlight the more-than-economic benefits of cooperation because it highlights the roots and links MSCs have with civil society organisations and other global social movements such as the open data and open economy communities, solidarity

economy, food sovereignty and organic movements (REAS, 2011; Bauwens, 2014; Manchester Veg People, 2016; Cooperativa Integral Catalana, 2016).

The open economy movement fights the increasing privatisation and commodification of knowledge, especially in the context of the internet age (P2P Value, 2016). Open economy activists are working to develop commons-based models for the governance and reproduction of abundant intellectual and immaterial resources (e.g. software and apps). At the same time, the P2P Foundation is working to link up with cooperatives as the ideal organisational type to develop a reciprocity-based model for the "scarce" material resources we use to reproduce material life (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014). The vision is for the surplus value to be kept inside the commons sphere itself, creating a merger between the open peer production of commons and cooperative ways of producing value: "it is the cooperatives that would, through their cooperative accumulation, fund the production of immaterial Commons, because they would pay and reward the peer producers associated with them" (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014:358). In this context, the OC framework calls for the evolution of the conventional cooperative model across four simultaneous dimensions (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014):

1. Open cooperatives should include in their own statutes that their objectives and work are aligned towards the common good, integrating externalities into their model.
2. All people affected by the activity should have a say (this is the specific multi-stakeholder nature of open cooperatives), practising economic democracy.

As Bauwens has pointed out, these two characteristics already exist in solidarity cooperatives – which is another name for multi-stakeholder cooperatives (Lund, 2012) – such as the popular social care MSCs in Italy and Canada. The P2P Foundation framework advances two extra practices that MSCs must incorporate in order to become meaningfully transformational (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014):

3. The cooperative must co-produce commons for the common good, whether immaterial or material.
4. The final requirement is a global approach, to create counter-power for a global ethical economy consisting of cooperative alliances, what the authors call "socialising their knowledge" across cooperative initiatives.

This framework is used to explore the type of MSCs that are emerging in food and farming in Europe. Two case studies, one from Spain and one from the UK, are used to interrogate the OC framework and consider how they fit in it. The choice of countries was based on two criteria: first, policy context similarities, as at the time of writing, both Spain and the UK have conservative governments which have introduced changes to cooperative legislation and are promoting 'consolidation' in the farming sector that is leading to more concentrated power (Bijman et al., 2012; Meliá and Martínez, 2014); secondly, interesting differences in cooperativism: the UK has few but large ACs (roughly 400), while Spanish ACs are greater in number (approximately 4,000) but on average, smaller in size, forming a very atomised sector (Bijman et al., 2012).

In Spain in particular, collaborations (some informal, some more structured) between consumer associations and groups of farmers have been taking place since the 1980s and have been discussed in the academic literature. These informal multi-stakeholder experiments have grown exponentially since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007/08 (Alonso Mielgo and Casado, 2000; Calle and Collado, 2010; Saravia Ramos, 2011). In the UK, the literature on MSCs is virtually non-existent, but initiatives based on MSC values are also emerging (Cultivate Oxford, 2016). Only one food and farming cooperative legally registered as a multi-stakeholder was found (Manchester Veg People, 2016) and this was used as a case study.

Can these MSCs be considered open cooperatives? To what extent do their practices align to the four dimensions of the OC framework? And to what extent are they socialising their knowledge and joining forces to develop a global ethical economy and realise more-than-economic benefits of cooperation? This paper uses interview and document data to answer these questions. Interviewees included members of the two cooperatives presented as case studies in the following section plus representatives of civil society organisations working alongside these cooperatives. Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out in total, including three members from Actyva (MSC based in Spain) and three from Manchester Veg People (MSC based in UK). The author carried out day visits to the cooperatives to better understand the context in which they are operating and their facilities and resources.

As part of this research, one representative from each of the following civil society organisations closely related to the work of these MSCs were also interviewed: Ecological Land Cooperative, Kindling Trust, Land Workers' Alliance and Somerset Cooperative Services in the UK; Soberania Alimentaria Magazine and Via Campesina in Spain. The interviews were carried out in the native language of the interviewees (Spanish or English). The interviews were transcribed in the language they were carried out in. Data in Spanish were coded in Spanish. Quotes from interviews selected for inclusion in this paper were translated to English. The software package NVivo was used to support management of the data set and the analysis. The analytical method used was thematic analysis, in order to take into account both the content and the context of documents (Merton, 1975). This research followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006), namely: familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. This list was not designed by the authors and was not used in this study as a linear model, rather, analysis was a recursive process. The next section introduces the two case studies from UK and Spain, data are then discussed in the framework of open cooperatives, followed by an analysis of the theoretical and practical implications for food and cooperative policy.

5. Case Studies

5.1 Case study I: Manchester Veg People, "keeping it fresh, organic and local"

Manchester Veg People (MVP) is a MSC based in the Northwest of England, the cradle region of modern cooperation, also home to Cooperatives UK, the representative body of cooperatives in Britain. Manchester is one of UK's largest cities with a population of 2.5 million people; despite its size, before MVP started trading, Greater Manchester had one of the lowest levels of access to locally produced food in the country as well as being situated in the region (North West) with the lowest number of organic farmers (Kindling Trust, 2012).

MVP was the result of an on-going collaboration that started in 2007 between the Kindling Trust and a small group of producers and two buyers that were exploring how to best coordinate their demand (Kindling Trust, 2012). Their aim was to develop *'a new model for the local food supply chain'*, MVP's strapline being: *'keeping it fresh, organic and local'.* At the time of writing, MVP's membership comprises of five growers and 20 buyers (including restaurants, caterers and public sector organisations) and at the time of writing, four worker members. Apart from one producer who is over 60 years old and a third generation farmer, all other MVP's growers are younger people new to farming, in contrast to the national trend (2 per cent of UK farmers is aged between 25 and 34 years old and around 41 per cent are over 50 years old (LANTRA, 2011).

The initiative received funding, advice and support from the UK Lottery Making Local Food Work Programme, Rural Development Programme for England, (part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), Cooperative Enterprise Hub, Plunkett Foundation and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation (MVP, 2014). MVP started working only with buyers from cafes and catering outlets. From its beginnings, MVP has grown from four farmers and two buyers, to eight farmers and forty (plus) business buyers, doubling their turnover in 2014/15 (MVP, 2016).

MVP self-describes on its website as '*something different*'. And indeed they are, since MVP is the only multi-stakeholder food cooperative in the UK that links growers and buyers. MVP was originally registered as a company limited by guarantee due to the constraints that the withdrawable share limit of £20k per member that was national policy at the time mean (this limit was raised to £100k in April 2014).

MVP's early engagement with Cooperatives UK and the Making Local Food Work expanded their network in different directions and were soon referred to Somerset Cooperative Services (SCS) to discuss their vision of forming a cooperative with weighted voting. In 2009, SCS, a Community Interest Company based in the South of England, became a sponsoring body able to register Industrial and Provident Society cooperatives with a new model of cooperative rules also known as the "Somerset Rules". These rules provide cooperatives with more flexibility than other existing model rules as they enable a heterogonous type of membership while strictly adhering to all the cooperative principles (SCS, 2009). In MVP, the voting is weighted as follows: 45 per cent growers, 30 per cent buyers, 25 per cent workers, to prevent the replication of power imbalances found in the conventional food system; so far they have not had the need to vote as all decisions are reached by consensus. Prices are calculated by adding 35 per cent mark-up to cover the running costs of the cooperative to the cost of production of each crop (including seasonal variations).

MVP's policy is to avoid buying-in from non-members if certain produce is not available. Instead, they aim to support buyer members to create more seasonal menus, but buyers can and still do use other suppliers, which as will be discussed in the next section can create difficulties for MVP's growers due to the cost of dealing with small orders. Recently, MVP has started selling to non-members (at a higher cost) as a strategy to increase demand. In 2016, MVP started a new vegetable box scheme selling directly to consumers, using a transparent purchasing policy that does include some buying abroad when needed.

In 2014, MVP and the Kindling Trust received funding from the charity Ashden Trust to carry out a pilot project with three public sector organisations over the next year with the aim of introducing more local organic vegetables on their menus within existing budgets (MVP, 2014). Supplying public institutions is one of their main strategies to scale up and democratise access to both organic and local food. MVP also serves the University of Manchester, its biggest buyer, which became a member in 2010 when they starting ordering for one of their kitchens and at the time of writing, MVP serves salad leaves for all their halls of residence plus 18 of their 28 campus outlets. Since they started working with the University of Manchester, new public sector organisations have become MVP's buyers, including Oldham Schools, Central Manchester NHS Trust and Manchester City Council (MVP, 2016).

Their unique combination of local and organic defines both their identity but also the main selling points of MVP in Manchester. By only selling locally-grown produce (defined as within 50 miles from the city centre) plus the fact that the produce is picked to order the day before delivery, MVP guarantees freshness, an attribute that translates into quality

but also into a longer window of time for chefs to use the produce, thus reducing waste.

5.2 Case study II: Actyva, "healthy food with a social and environmental commitment"

Actyva is a multi-stakeholder initiative being developed in Cáceres, a city of Extremadura, a region located in Western Spain. Extremadura is one of Spain's 17 autonomous communities, with a mainly rural character, the fifth largest by area but the twelfth in terms of population numbers, with just over a million inhabitants.

The idea of setting up Actyva originated in 2010-2011 when unemployed (and at risk of exclusion) members of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) – a long established union based on anarcho-syndicalist principles – decided to create a formal structure that could help them cover not only their own needs but those of the people around them. Extremadura has the highest rate of shadow economy (cash in hand economy) in the country at 31.1 per cent (6.5 percentage points higher than the national average) with over 30 per cent unemployment (GESTHA, 2014). Actyva aims to offer both a channel to help people out of the 'submerged economy' and a model that can be replicated.

Actyva started with 24 small-scale producers (both livestock and horticultural producers), including 16 farmers following extensive farming methods (of whom 7 are also processors), most of whom are part of existing local growers' collectives. The cooperative also employed one advisor, two volunteers in charge of distribution and management, 207 customers and different professionals (marketing, consultancy, training) who are also members and support farmers to better market their products and the cooperative's activities (Actyva, 2015).

As opposed to MVP, Actyva has not received any external funding and relies on members' joining fees and investments. However, Actyva does channel public subsidies to members, either by providing information about funding programmes or alerting them to subsidised training courses. Actyva aims to realise a model of local sustainable agriculture that follows agro-ecological and food sovereignty principles, based on mutual aid and networking and aims for social, economic and environmental sustainability. Spanish organic producers have found more lucrative and bulk markets in northern Europe (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014:133), but Actyva's mission is to keep agroecological produce local, only exporting to Europe surplus for products with saturated markets in Spain. The other condition for export is only to sell to like-minded, politically aware buyers that practice the 'solidarity economy'.

Actyva's two main food initiatives are Big Brother Bio-Farming (BBBF) and *'Cáceres para comérselo'* (that could be translated as '*Cáceres, so good you could eat it*'. BBBF, "the big brother of organic farms", is an online platform that facilitates and encourages small organic producers to live-stream activities happening on their farms as well as providing online courses and spaces for consumers and producers to create and develop regular contact. The name not only refers to the fact that consumers can watch what happens on the farm but also plays with the Spanish traditional street retailing expression of the three Bs: *'bueno, bonito y barato'*, which translates as '*good, nice and cheap*', challenging the assumption that organic food has to be expensive or only for "discerning customers". In conjunction with BBBF, *'Cáceres para comérselo'* was launched in March 2014 with the aim to support small agro-ecological local producers in their marketing and distribution activities. The aim of this programme was to sign up 300 households for a weekly vegetable box and to become members. Deliveries were going to go not only to households, but to members' workplaces with the view to concentrate demand, increase impact of sustainable consumption and reduce delivery costs and emissions. The initiative was stopped at the end of 2015 as the target was not reached and the members are considering different options on how to move this project forward.

6. Findings and discussion

This section analyses the findings from the case studies. The following discussion is structured according the P2P Foundation's four requirements for "open coops": integrating externalities into their model, practising economic democracy, co-producing commons and having a global outlook. Later, the associated theoretical and practical implications for food policy will be examined.

6.1. Internalising negative externalities

6.1.1 Financial externalities

Farmers get an increasingly small piece of the pie of food profits (DEFRA, 2012). Pricing is a thorny issue, not just for MSCs but for the whole sustainable food movement (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014). The debate on the idea of a 'just price' has been going on since at least the time of Aristotle (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014:34). The multi-dimensional character of sustainability and the multiple meanings of food mean that fixing work, inputs, impacts (environmental and socio-economic) and values into a price is a daunting task with no clear method (Sustainable Food Trust, 2013). MVP's attempt to develop a pricing formula has proved to be a task more challenging than expected. Nevertheless, by having this debate, both MSCs are redefining and relocating value, raising questions about who enjoys the benefits of its creation, whether economic, social or other (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014:13), disentangling the significance of money and monetized value in these closer trading relations.

Despite being paid a fair price for their products, beginnings are hard, especially for farming businesses, and as one of the MVP members points out below, despite efforts to coordinate joint deliveries with other members, there is a tension between their vision and the costs of some of the first deliveries:

> *"The orders from MVP have been very small, so when we've been driving them to the unit, which is the other side of Manchester is actually costing us because there is nearly nothing at the back of van, but we do it because we are committed to the vision.* [...] *Once we get to the kind of volumes that there's potential for, then suddenly we'll have £1000k at the back of the van rather than £60".* (MVP member)

Actyva in turn is trying to go beyond conventional capital by being involved in the alternative currency movement and being members of the Community Exchange System, used by many Spanish integral cooperatives (Red the Cooperativas Integrales, 2016).

Another difference in the case studies refers to their approach to organic certification. MVP's produce is organic certified, plus their buyers also display MVP stickers in their premises to communicate their participation in the cooperative to consumers. This raises both their returns and prices and also gives them a competitive edge as the only producers of local organic food in Manchester. In contrast, Actyva has opted for a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS). Both strategies have benefits and risks. As discussed earlier, information about the invisible attributes of food are increasingly important for consumers, and as a result, have also become selling points. Becker has discussed how physical objects get their character and meaning from the collective activities of people (Becker, 1998), conveyed, in this particular case, through stickers. A humble leek suddenly changes its value and connotations when it carries a sticker that says 'organic' or 'MVP' as it conveys political, geographical, socio-economic and quality dimensions that allow buyers to express their values when buying food. On the other hand, the sticker becomes the replacement of trust developed through multiple encounters allowed by short distances and familiarity, allowing 'conversion of culturally defined values into monetary value' (Pratt and Luetchford, 2014:40).

At the time of writing, Actyva was reflecting on their Cáceres para Comérselo project as

they did not reach their target number of orders to make it financially viable. They are considering several options, including: supplying restaurants and a catering company serving school menus; resuming the negotiation of a space in the city centre's wholesale market with their local authority, with the idea of using it as both a storage and distribution point; establish a monthly market; and finally, trying to match the offer to consumer members' needs more closely, for which they have identified a higher degree of involvement in decision making in the cooperative is key (Actyva, 2015)

6.1.2. Environmental externalities

The topic of fair prices opens up the complex topic of sustainability since the conventional agriculture these MSCs have to compete with, treats human and environmental costs as externalities not included in the price of their products (Gray, 2012). As suggested by Gray, MSCs offer an organisational structure that automatically internalises those human and environmental costs (Gray, 2014); however, by internalising those costs, they create other tensions related to their financial sustainability as we can see from our examples, which are struggling to grow their enterprises.

When analysing these MSCs' approach to sustainability, a dual strategy emerges: first, to minimise and second to internalise normally non-accounted externalities of food production through their growing methods, governance and close connections with their buyers and locality that reduce waste and transport. Consequently, their financial sustainability is threatened as a result, since they have to compete with other players who do not cover those externalities.

Both cooperatives have small-scale farmer members using agro-ecological, labour-intensive methods. Their emphasis on locality and seasonality permeates their vision and work, adapting to local conditions, varieties and needs. For MVP, reducing waste both at the farm and down the food chain is one of their main objectives, something they achieve by investing time resources in maintaining regular discussions between growers and buyers around crop planning, picking to order to ensure the produce is as fresh as possible and working on adapting menus to seasons. In turn, Actyva allocates similar importance to social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, reflected in their BBBFarming initiative and their determination to work with members at risk of social exclusion.

Both cooperatives are putting efforts to sustain and reproduce the farming population by working with growers new to farming, Actyva through their work with neo-rurals (former urbanites) and MVP by being involved in the Kindling Trust's FarmStart project that is also supporting new entries into agriculture. The FarmStart initiative has now been implemented in London through connections with agricultural workers' cooperative OrganicLea (OrganicLea, 2015).

6.2. Reconnecting: Economic democracy

Food is rich in social meanings, not just nutrients, and the importance of making consumers aware of the invisible attributes of food (method of production, distribution and how beings and the planet were treated along the way) is patent in both case studies. These cooperatives have identified the need to bring together the two weakest links in the food system: small producers and consumers.

As commercial organisations, MSCs recreate parallel versions of the conventional market, creating spaces where producer-consumer relations and expectations must be negotiated, agreed and managed. The case studies challenge the accepted message reinforced by supermarkets that assumes the aims of farmers and consumers are

irreconcilable. Furthermore, they call for connected 'local to local' networks of place-based food systems, rather than reinforcing the idea that there is a single integrated food system. MSCs aim to go beyond simplistic dichotomies of local and global scale and between urban and rural dimensions. However, trying to convince others that multi-stakeholderism is a good idea is not easy as these quotes reflect:

> *"When we originally had the idea people said it's really hard to get even growers get together, never mind getting growers and buyers work together and everybody I spoke to said "no, no, it doesn't make any sense, X needs to set up two different coops, a producers coop and a buyers coops" and I was saying "but that doesn't make any sense because then you've got total conflict of interest going on and the only way you can sort that out is to bring people together", and it's just, I don't know, it's funny… [laughs]"* (MVP member)

> *"People say you're mad if you try to reconcile the interests of producers and consumers because people say food producers want high prices and consumers want low prices. Our research has shown that their interests are really, really tightly aligned. And we are told they're very different hmm…"* (Plunkett Foundation representative)

When asked by whom, the following long but illustrative reflection was offered:

"it tends to be the retailers and the processors, the people who keep them apart; […] people just assume that they have very different views and the cooperative movement is based on the fact, the belief that if you are in a rural community, producer cooperatives are your base because that is where your farmers are and consumer cooperatives operate in urban areas because that is where the consumers are… and that is quite wrong really, that is one of the great regrets, and our founder talked about it, they did not ever reconcile that, they didn't ever get to a common understanding that you can meet producer and consumer interests through cooperative action. There are still today very few examples of that, which is a shame, is a shame, it makes sense. In theory it makes a lot of sense, but I think people would argue that in practice is pretty difficult". (Plunkett Foundation representative)

In conventional food systems, buyers/customers weigh up economic reasons to decide whether to exit a trading relationship, normally doing so in an indirect and impersonal way (i.e. not picking a product from a supermarket shelf or a catalogue in the case of buyers). In MSCs, this model is turned on its head, prioritising instead the option of voice over exit (of the trade relationship) (Hirschman, 1970). By institutionalising the voicing of concerns and disagreements, economics become politics and social relations; the indirect and impersonal approach of supermarkets becomes direct and messy in MSCs. Trade relations become more personal, identities are known and interdependence is not only acknowledged in principle but also in the governance of the cooperatives through weighted voting. They also remove distant anonymous shareholders from the equation, as members are local to the cooperatives.

The model involves a certain degree of contact between farmers and buyers, which is a strength as it increases their resilience, but a challenge in terms of time and geographical constraints. If continuing to grow, MVP has already identified a federated model of sister cooperatives as an adequate strategy to expanding without losing close working connections. But already one of their challenges is to find ways to get all members at the same table, a hard task taking into account buyers and growers have virtually opposite timetables. As one of the MVP members reflects: *'[some of the buyers] don't have the time or as much inclination really to get involved I think'* but it is acknowledged that it is not just a matter of timetables, but also ways of working as this quote reveals:

> *"It's a very new thing for these businesses, new in lots of ways, firstly in how they buy from MVP, they're used to just phoning up at 11 o'clock at night at the end of their service and ask for produce that would be delivered first thing the next morning. With MVP they have to order more in advance because we pick to order. Secondly, they're not used to any fruit and vegetable supplier asking them to be involved in the business and thirdly none of the restaurants or the university were used to cooperative work. So it's new in many levels, I think quite challenging, so if their participation hasn't been as great, I think there are loads of good reasons for it"* (MVP member)

The above comment reflects the complexity of bringing diverse memberships with not only different perspectives and interests but also routines and timetables together, which some authors believe will take MSCs down the route of conversion (Lindsay and Hems, 2004). However, this can also be seen as a first step and part of the mission of MSCs: coordinating and bringing together unlikely allies in the pursuit of common needs. Authors agreeing with this view suggest that having a long term view is key and that with time, rather than risk of conversion, what emerge are reduced transaction costs thanks to the multi-stakeholder approach that structurally fosters communication, trust and engagement (Lund, 2012).

At the same time, having direct interaction with other groups of actors increases accountability as growers and producers know they are going to see each other regularly. This regular contact is also part of trying to introduce a variety of methods of governance beyond the attendance at decision making meetings, for example involving MVP buyers in choosing varieties grown by farmer members or Actyva consumer members informally auditing farmers through farm visits and discussion of the processes and quality of a members' products when compared to agreed standards, part of their Participatory Guarantee System. Reconnecting with different groups also utilises the collective intelligence of the membership, as in the case of Actyva, where marketing experts were working with small farmers to advertise the social and ecological benefits of their extensive farming methods.

6.3. Co-producing commons

From the environmental commons of soil, water, air, nutrients and energy used to produce food, to the ecological public health commons (Rayner and Lang, 2013), no other topic brings together so many aspects of the commons as food (Ostrom, 1990; Böhm et al., 2014). In this section, the concepts of locality and organic farming are used to discuss how these MSCs are addressing the commons. While organic farming promotes techniques that are more protective of the commons, the local dimension introduces a level of responsibility and accountability to the local community with regards to business practices and the stewardship of the land cultivated.

Both case studies have emerged in the edges of and are dependent on cities, acting as a link between urban and rural actors. When unpicking the reasons given for the geographical delimitation imposed for the produce traded by these cooperatives (only recently (2016) MVP started to rely on some imports for its new vegetable box scheme), short distances come up as intrinsically interconnected to discourses of provenance, sustainability (reducing food miles), quality (freshness) but also as highlighting the value of face to face contact amongst members. Localness is a cross-cutting theme that acts as a normative but also identity aspect of these MSCs. It also uncovers tensions in relation to urban consumers' wants, wages and fairness as this quote shows, bringing the issue of fair trade closer to home:

"*everybody is talking about wanting local, sustainable food, and "we want more local food", so then you have to bloody pay for it, because you can't expect people to go into a back-breaking, high risk job, you know?" (*MVP member)

Their aim is to produce environmental commons through organic methods and financial and social commons through a stronger local economy. And linked to local food is the concept of seasonality. A common criticism of narrow localist approaches highlights the fact that local food does not necessarily have a lower environmental footprint if grown out of season (Sharzer, 2012; Baggini, 2014). Both MSCs aim to educate members about seasonality as part of their mission, a topic especially relevant to MVP's work around supporting members to make their menus more seasonal (also a key strategy to reducing

costs as produce is cheaper when in season, opening potential scaling-up routes through public procurement by fitting into their existing tight budgets).

This analysis of the emphasis on locality by the case studies has revealed how the rural urban divide is not considered in the open coop framework, but is key to food studies. Cosmopolitan localism (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010), a concept discussed in more detail in the next section, brings together the requirements of the open coop framework by calling for the creation of strong and healthier local communities and economies with a global awareness and participation that look after their environmental commons (MVP, 2016). The findings suggest there are other commons these MSCs also contribute to preserve: local farming culture, by supporting new entries into this activity; and cooperative communities, by fostering cooperativised livelihoods.

6.4. Global outlook: socialising knowledge

Cooperatives can be described as potential leading actors in shortened food chains as they make possible "economies of scope" or "synergy" versus simplistic "economies of scale" (Marsden et al., 2002). Pratt and Luetchford have highlighted how political positions and political aims can act as a common ground where both consumers and producers with apparently clashing interests can meet and strive (Pratt and Luetchford 2014:181). This section discusses how the case studies bring political economies of scope and synergy to local food systems. Table 1 shows Actyva's and Manchester Veg People's networks spreading at different levels of the global food policy arena.

Findings from both case studies reflect that MSCs can bring together economic benefits from collective bargaining while also serving as a melting pot for environmental, political, health and livelihood concerns. Their wide range of strategies to attempt change comes from their vision down to their day-to-day practices. Starting with their democratic governance model, the efforts focus on re-localising trade and financial returns as well as production and consumption in an increasingly global food market.

The uniqueness of their produce comes from how it is grown and traded, giving them a comparative advantage over competitors who cannot guarantee either the organic and local attributes neither the values and practices associated with their production, transforming the offer in their local areas. These MSCs are also transforming buyers' purchasing practices away from inertia by sharing the knowledge of the different members' groups (farmers, buyers, workers, etc), and by asking them to get involved in collaborative crop planning, order more in advance and/or adapt their menus to seasonal ingredients.

Despite their focus on locality, cooperative members interviewed for this study were aware of the dangers of short-sighted "defensive localism". This term has been defined by Morgan and Sonnino as a *'narrow, self-referential and exclusive'* alternative to the conventional food system"; instead, these cooperatives have opted for what the authors refer to as *'cosmopolitan localism',* which in contrast is *'capacious, multi-cultural and inclusive'* (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010, 212). As shown in Table 1, apart from being formed of heterogeneous memberships, both MSCs also have wide networks with other players at local, regional, national and international levels, being active and aware of the 'global struggle' for a better food system (Allen, 2004). This is partly in line with the last condition for open coops in relation to socialising their knowledge but work to create closer connections with other cooperatives needs to be developed, for example, MVP could explore local to local trade by purchasing produce from other like-minded cooperatives for their vegetable box rather than from wholesalers.

Münkner pointed out that the MSC is not a brand new concept, but "it corresponds to the

original mission of cooperatives to render services in all aspects of life (Münkner, 2004). In this sense, MSCs are also challenging modern models of cooperation, especially Actyva that offers other services beyond food. As one of its members put it in these words:

> *"this is not a new approach, but a return to the original vision of the movement 'the cooperative models of the 19th century [...] were very inclusive, all facets of human life; maybe this aspect has been a bit relegated in the 20th century but it is being incorporated again"* (Actyva member).

Another effort to create a wider impact is their work to change public procurement practices. State-funded food has been identified as a key route to a fairer and greener food system (De Schutter, 2014). Actyva is considering this route and MVP is already tapping into this scaling-up strategy, spreading the common good of local, fresh organic food to a wider range of eaters. MVP values public procurement collaborations as they see them as a way of democratising locally-produced organic food and an opportunity to scale up their initiative in order to create more jobs in farming.

By aiming for a multidimensional vision of sustainability, they can attract those interested in specific aspects, e.g. organic, or local or fair pay, educating them later about existing interconnections in the food system. As highlighted by Mooney, "in the realm of social relations, cooperatives provide an interesting site for the exploration of tensions […] on the social relations of production and social relations of consumption" (Mooney, 2004:80-81). Furthermore, they act as urban-rural links and their networks with civil society organisations go from local to global. Nevertheless, local initiatives cannot achieve change unless replicated at a global level, something that Actyva's members are aware of:

> *"Change has to be global, otherwise it does not work. It is something we should have learnt from history. Partial change not only at functional but regional level end up being absorbed; they either get diluted or recaptured by the system. [...] But it is true that [the cooperative model] exists in a capitalist economy where what matters is not what you do but what you have. In that sense, who has the capacity of influence whom? Cooperatives over capital or capital over cooperatives? Because capital permeates inundates everything. Even ourselves, right? Without people who have it very clear behind the cooperative so that it doesn't itself let go, it is very difficult... it's very difficult really".* (Actyva member)

This accepted view of ACs as being "for profit" is reinforced by the current legal framework in which ACs are seen as associations of farmers that pursue economic benefits, disconnecting the cooperative model from its traditional solidarity roots (Giagnocavo and Vargas-Vasserot, 2012).

Both case studies socialise their experiences and knowledge with other groups working on related issues (alternative currencies, food sovereignty movement, etc). Two examples of knowledge-exchange fora used by these MSCs are the Oxford Real Farming Conference, that both cooperatives regularly attend, and the relatively new union for small and medium scale farmers, the Land Workers' Alliance (ORFC, 2014; LWA, 2016). MVP's work is "inspired and guided by a radical perspective that identifies the need for significant social change" (MVP, 2016). MVP also has openly shared its original business plan to encourage the growth of other MSCs. MVP operates an Open Book policy and shares their accounts with any member who has been a member for six months. This emphasis on openness and transparency is also followed by Actyva, reflected for example in their willingness to publish their performance online and share the learning from their first months and initiatives.

6.5. Legal aspects

When undertaking thematic analysis to investigate the dynamics and experiences of these two MSCs, the theme of cooperative legislation emerged quite prominently and it is discussed here as it adds an extra layer to the open coop framework. In fact, the legal

aspect of Actyva is one of the most complex and interesting dimensions of this case study. Cooperative law in Spain is very complex. Spain is the European country with the most pieces of cooperative legislation (Giagnocavo and Vargas-Vasserot, 2012). Spain has a double layer of legislation: a state law for cooperatives active in two or more autonomous communities and a second layer at the autonomous community level with devolved powers and legislation for those cooperatives operating in their own region. This myriad of laws that get updated and approved at different times complicates the picture enormously. In the case of Actyva, their aim is to register as a not-for profit integral cooperative (IC). The IC model goes beyond the UK's multi-stakeholder form, as it not only involves different types of members but also different cooperativised activities. Actyva's mission is to provide members not only with food, but other products and services that members identify as needs. The current 1999 estate law includes the integral form, with at least two principal cooperative activities/members, but few autonomous communities such as Catalonia (where most ICs are based) and Asturias recognise the integral form in their regional legislation. Extremadura's law dating from 1988 does not include the IC model; however, this might soon change as this law was being updated at the time of writing. The regional government undertook a consultation process and Actyva was approached for their input even before they were legally incorporated but locally active.

Actyva is currently registered in Extremadura as a not-for-profit consumer cooperative with secondary activities, but this legal form is not a fair reflection of the commitment and engagement of different types of members and for this reason they are actively seeking to register as an integral community. At present, Actyva has two options to achieve this: either register in Madrid under the state law or lobby their regional government to include the integral model in the upcoming legislation. Both routes have been pursued and at the moment members are waiting to hear which one gives results first. In Extremadura they have already introduced a new legal change: the not-for-profit route was not an option for cooperatives in the regional law. They might also be unintentionally changing or at least, questioning, legislation at state level. When registering an integral cooperative of any type, members are asked to specify their activities; when trying to register in Madrid, Actyva stated their wish to have both agriculture as one of their activities but at the same time being not- for-profit, their request clashed with the administration's more conventional idea of what ACs are for. Once registered, they will have a diverse membership of workers, producers, consumers and social members (those at risk of social or economic exclusion).

In the UK, the legal framework is completely opposite to that of Spain. There is no cooperative legal form as such in Britain, and it is a constitution that makes a cooperative (Mulqueen, 2011). In 2009, the Somerset Cooperative Rules were created to specifically support MSCs wishing to weight the votes of their different member types (SCS, 2009).

There is a historical lack of clarity about what type of cooperative is best for rural or urban contexts as a cooperative worker from the cooperative development agency that created the Somerset Rules explains:

> *"agriculture poses some particular challenges for cooperation, it tends to involve people spread out over quite a large area, maybe working most of the time by themselves or very small groups, so perhaps it is not immediately straight forward to create agricultural cooperatives. And it's also I think the point with the two great traditions of cooperation: workers cooperation and consumer cooperation, sort of collide, but…there's a general assumption that in retail one expects consumer cooperatives and in manufacturing one expects worker cooperatives but in agriculture it's not all together clear and people have tried different approaches and I think what we decided to do in SCS was to say, well, maybe both stakeholder groups are of more or less equal importance and we want to find somehow a way of balancing the voice of the large number of consumers with the voice of the smaller number of producers, and so that was something that was very much on our minds"* (SCS representative)

MVP welcomed the new Somerset Rules, but the model is still very new and members, especially those not familiar to cooperative working, had to be introduced to it. The model helps the cooperative avoid replicating the system they are trying to change.

This section has highlighted the ongoing issue of how cooperatives are still part of a market economy and need to fit in with existing legal frameworks or struggle to create their own. The evidence from the case studies suggests that having an adequate legal framework is not sufficient to encourage MS initiatives due to the bottom-up nature of these associations, but it can create the right policy context for MSCs to flourish. The MSC legal model in UK with weighted voting, while still very new, seems like a positive development. More support is needed to advise interested groups in selecting and applying the right legal frameworks for their specific case. At the moment, as both case studies suggest, this aspect is absorbing time and resources that could be invested in other activities such as marketing and engagement with members.

7. Six more-than-economic benefits of MSCs

The case studies suggest MSCs operating in food and agriculture have the potential to generate a diverse range of more-than-economic benefits associated to their cooperative structure and operations. These potential benefits emerge when bringing together actors who are used to thinking they have opposite interests and by questioning the shortcomings of the hegemonic food system, challenging and competing with long-established cultural, legal, dominant cooperative imaginaries and economic norms. The opportunity of the benefits being realised thus often encounter difficulties, creating a push-pull dynamic characteristic of initiatives that are operating in a specific socio-economic context that they are trying to transform at the same time. These benefits and counter-arguments can be classified as follows:

7.1. Economic: While both cooperatives are struggling to achieve financial sustainability, their abundant social capital has helped them compensate to a degree for the lack of financial capital. Despite the small scale of their operations, the fact they exist is sufficient (much like the organic or fair trade movement) to create debate, help maintain the standard, keep mainstream retailers on their toes (Sanchez and Roelants, 2011) and keep the ongoing 'rural struggle' alive (Mooney, 2004). However, currently the price of food items is not often related to the cost of production as retailers and subsidies distort this relationship. A formula for pricing is still missing; fair pricing and true cost accounting for food and farming are still an unsolved problem (SFT, 2013). Produce from MSCs is perceived as expensive as it incorporates externalities of food production (but less waste means overall price per unit can be the same). Often, MSCs cannot be convenient or efficient in the short term, they need a long term view but exist in market economies guided by short-termism.

7.2. Sectorial: At the same time, MSCs confuse the simplicity of the old reductionist agricultural paradigm characterised by its clearly divided market roles. The integration of different actors involves a process of negotiating expectations and clashing interests in order to achieve a middle point specially around the uncomfortable topic of agreeing a "fair price"; they attempt to do so by prioritising voice over exit mechanisms, which is time- and energy-demanding but can be a resilient and sustainable governance approach in the long term (Lund, 2012).

Additionally, the dominant reductionist paradigm of agriculture has invested a lot of effort and capital to transform peasant growers into business entrepreneurs and change the rural image of farming in order to project a more business-like one (Lang et al., 2009).

The “get big or get out” motto of conventional agri-businesses aiming for more mechanisation and less reliance on human labour is however not necessarily a synonym of success for these MSCs, especially because one of their objectives is to create more employment opportunities in farming, not fewer. In this sense, these MSCs are challenging mainstream meanings of efficiency and indicators of success. Intrinsic to their multi-stakeholder structure, there is also a challenge of conventional definitions of “member” in agricultural cooperatives by opening their doors to consumers and workers. But their resistance goes beyond membership. Agricultural cooperatives are also pushed to get big or get out (Gray and Stevenson, 2008); in that context, these MSCs are proposing a post-productionist version that goes beyond the bulk savings and dividends focus of conventional farming cooperatives.

7. 3. Legal: Their new legal form shows a different way of doing things is possible, but it is very resource demanding. However, the MSC legal model is new and complex and relies on willingness of members and forward thinking business advisors to propose it to new enterprises as it is not very practical or convenient to get established. On the other hand, the MSC legal form is a positive development as it allows members to have a voting system that does not replicate the power imbalances they set out to eliminate.

7.4. Cultural: The dominant culture of consumer choice is one of the pillars of the conventional food system that is confronted by the MSC model. By mainly offering crops that can be grown locally, these MSCs are challenging conventional understandings of progress based on ample choice. However, at the same time, they are offering choice of new varieties and new local products not available at large retailers. They are also maintaining the local food growing culture by supporting new entries into farming.

7.5. Policy and public procurement: MSCs highlight the unfavourable policy contexts for both subsidies and public procurement contracts, while also providing a route to challenge and improve current practices. In the case of MVP and - perhaps for Actyva too if its members decide to go down that route - tapping into and transforming public procurement’s easy and long established contracts, that seek value for money at the expense of quality and fair returns to producers, is both part of its mission and their income strategy. Finding public organisations that have a champion with a long-term vision and willingness to invest the time to explore how to navigate contract requirements and test new seasonal menus that still match their budgets is not an easy task. However, the benefits of tapping into public procurement are huge, both for MSCs, as it gives them financial stability, but also for the general public as it democratises access to local and organic food.

Despite their local focus, MSCs are – at a local level and a national level through their networks – contributing to the debate on self-reliance versus global food trade promoted by policies formulated by the European Union and the World Trade Organisation (Lang et al., 2009). These MSCs do not exist in isolation with the freedom to shape trade to their vision, but in a complex policy arena of multilevel governance.

7.6. Academic: MSCs pose a challenge to academia’s often divisive disciplinary lenses. As Goodman and De Puis (2002) have highlighted, agricultural economics is separate from cultural theories of consumption and this division needs to be overcome. A decade ago Mooney called for a new sociology of cooperation in production and consumption (Mooney, 2004); MSCs revive that call and push food scholars to develop this line of research, acknowledge and analyse real experiments happening on the ground.

The interconnections of the above categories are clear. The multi-faceted character of MSCs as enterprises, social networks, object of studies and legal entities, allow them to act as a lever for change in different facets of society.

8. Conclusion

This paper started by reviewing historical attempts to create MSC initiatives in food and farming and then discussed the current literature on MSCs. MSCs operating in present food systems are of interest because they are attempting to revive an old aspiration of the cooperative movement to bring together workers and consumers under the same cooperative banner. Bauwens and Kostakis' (2014) "Open Cooperative" model was used as a lens to frame MSCs' practices in the context of globalised food systems, knowledge and social movements. This framework calls for a model of open MSCs that meet four requirements: dealing with negative externalities, participatory democracy, co-production of commons and global outlook. Developed by the P2P Foundation, a civil society organisation promoting the open and peer-to-peer economy, OC offers an adequate framework with sufficient explanatory potential to accommodate the fact that the MSC case studies are unlike conventional cooperatives. These MSCs are moving beyond working to serve the interests of their members only, joining up global struggles and diverse social movements, including open and pro-commons economic movements. The framework offers a tool to analyse the extent to which the case studies are working to alter the context cooperatives struggle to exist in, rather than just doing well enough to survive in it. Conventional cooperatives by definition exist for the benefits of the members. Some MSCs go beyond that vision in order to transform the contexts that oppress them by introducing other actors as members and changing buying habits. This research has suggested how MSCs working in food and farming can offer a forum for alliances between the open economy and the cooperative movements that brings about a series of more-than-economic benefits to members, wider society and the environment. These alliances have an impact on the practices of the cooperatives and the goals of the social movements involved: they are messy, distributed and becoming self-aware of the interconnecting challenges facing them, including geopolitical issues, access to resources and land, privatisation of knowledge and gender struggles.

The potential and challenges of MSCs as a tool for decentralisation of power and supply in the food system at a time when capitalism is concentrating not only capital but also its workforce (namely consumers) in cities emerged from the data. A MSC vision requires robust efforts from both ends of the food chain: farmers going downstream and consumers and buyers going upstream, adopting more relational ways of trading, based on geographical and temporal connections. The findings from the two case studies presented show that the MSC model is demanding and messy, reflecting a genuine and passionate attempt to realise all the criteria of multidimensional sustainability, linking environmental and health concerns with a call for social justice. Being agents of transformation, MSC's practices are both oppositional and alternative, putting into practice politics of collective responsibility.

The case studies presented are examples of Open Cooperatives, meeting in varying degrees all four dimensions of the framework. The MSCs discussed are aspiring to transform the food system following two strategies: first, by raising awareness of and reducing unaccounted externalities of food production. Second, by aiming for multidimensional sustainability, creating a multi-campaign space where efforts to address the new fundamentals are coming together. Ostensibly, they seem to have unclear objectives with regards to co-production of commons: are they about realising a closed local economy? Championing greener methods of production? Or providing affordable food? Creating farming jobs and getting a good return for producers? Different from the "monoculture cooperativism" only covering one aspect of members' lives, MSCs exemplify a much more diverse and diffused notion of cooperation, the multiplicity of their

objectives being a reflection of the increasing policy stretching that global food governance is experiencing. Going beyond an easily defined set of economic objectives is messy, as different members will rate more-than-economic benefits differently, generating internal discussions about what aims are more important: e.g. protect local food or meet consumer members' desires for imported produce.

In terms of policy lessons, this research has revealed that an adequate legal framework is not sufficient to encourage MS initiatives due to the bottom-up nature of these associations, but it can create the right policy context and minimise the diversion of much needed cooperative resources. The case studies raise questions of whether current farming subsidies for rural collaboration might be better invested in fostering new models of MS cooperation that foster links between rural and urban development. EU policy makers should consider what kind of cooperation they want to reproduce through subsidy support. However, the challenges facing MSCs are not only related to multilevel governance, but also to long-established cultural and social norms and expectations around food, price and progress that affect perceptions of farming and buying habits, both domestic and in public procurement.

At the organisational level, if principles, governance and "outward" networks are cultivated, MSCs can become a connecting link between bottom-up initiatives and top-down food policies, a link with the potential to be scaled-up by collaborative public procurement strategies. Their heterogeneous memberships and networks make them complex but also give them resilience, contacts and a voice at different platforms of the multilevel governance of global food policy.

The emergence of MSCs highlights the need for a post-productivist model of cooperation, one that acknowledges the challenges that consumers and producers are facing in the 21st century food system, opposing the outdated approach to food policy that confines them to isolated silos and striving for integration, an essential condition to achieve truly sustainable food systems.

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